

Unemployment: Older workers waiting for the revolution

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Older workers waiting for jobs

Don Pittis looks at the difficult job market for workers in their 60s and 70s and the misplaced resentment of older workers.

There's a revolution coming. That's what employment experts are saying, and David Hurdon is one of the growing number of Canadians who can't wait.

"I need to work," he says.





CARP's job fair in Mississauga in February drew about 600 seniors. (CARP)

Hurdon left his last full time "formal" job as vice-president of retailing at winemaker Kittling Ridge at age 54. That was 10 years ago, and since then he has been self-employed and never earned enough to set aside a retirement nest egg.

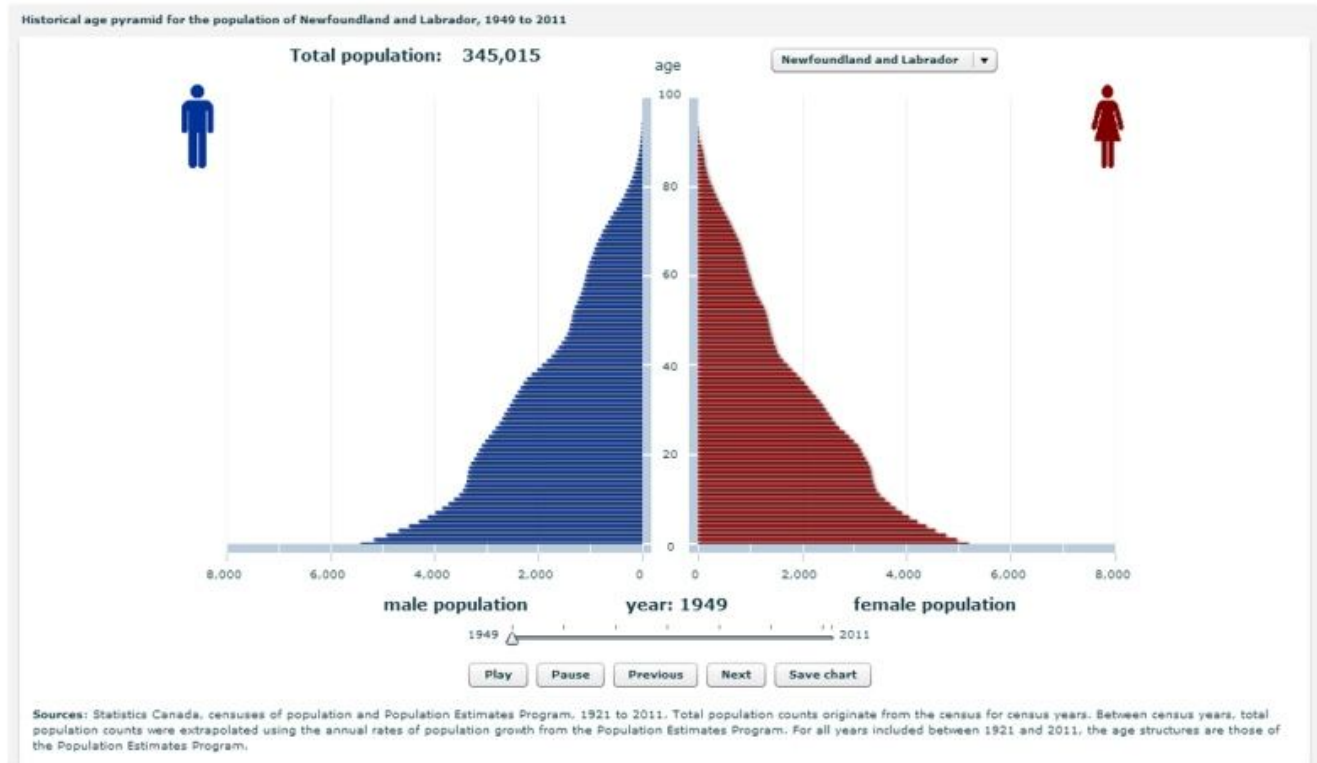
When he heard about a job fair run by CARP (a group representing older Canadians) that is specifically aimed at people trying to get back into the workforce, Hurdon was optimistic about finding a good job.

Lisa Taylor says he has every right to be. Taylor is president of The Challenge Factory and she is an activist promoting a transformation of the Canadian workforce.

"The concept of continuing to work in your sixties and seventies is a fairly new construct," says Taylor after giving a pep talk to an audience of some 200 elders at the event. "You know, it wasn't so long ago that marketing campaigns were telling us that retirement would happen at 55."

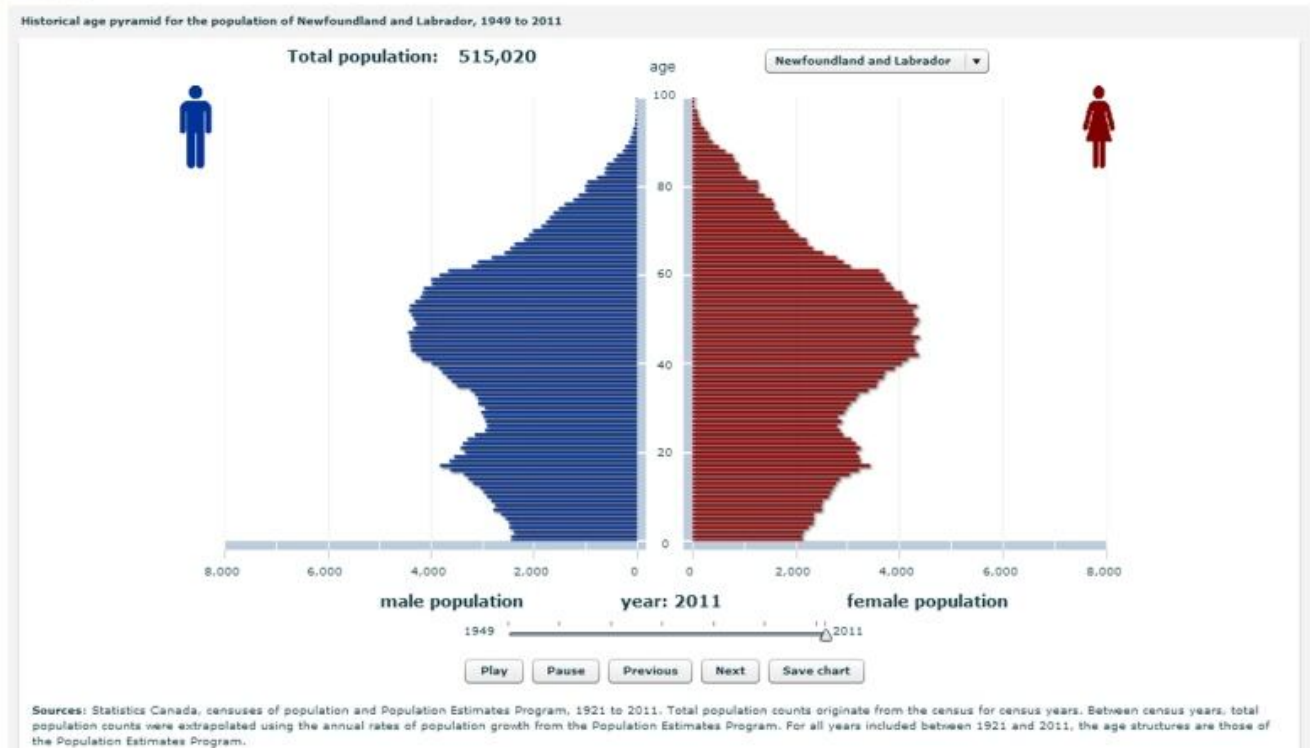
Historical age pyramid

Description



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This historical age pyramid from Statistics Canada shows Newfoundland and Labrador's population breakdown in 1949 (top) vs. 2011 (bottom). Click on the link in the story to see the full interactive for all Canadian regions. (Statistics Canada)

She says that's crazy, and a fabulous graphical analysis called an interactive population pyramid created by Statistics Canada shows why.

As you move the slider at the bottom, the graph shows the number of Canadians in each age group over time. In the 1920s it was the rare person indeed who reached 80. From about 1943 to 1962 the graphic exhibits a clear pyramidal shape - a few old people were supported by a huge youthful base.

But as the slider moves closer to the present, the birth rate falls and lifespans get longer. That baby boom bulge moves higher and the base of young people shrinks.

Newfoundland and Labrador is leading the way. In that part of the country, the "pyramid" is beginning to look distinctly top heavy, more like a bushy tree.

As The Economist magazine has editorialized, "If old people leave the workforce early, they become dependent on young people for their living." Even if older people have private money invested in stocks and bonds, the returns on that investment all have to be created by the shrinking workforce.

Taylor is convinced that is unsustainable. And she rejects the idea that by staying in the workforce, older people prevent the young from finding work. That's the "lump of labour fallacy" that has been used in the past to keep women from working and discourage immigration by "foreigners who will take all the jobs."

"In fact, research shows that where there is greater employment levels at the more senior age level in a society, youth unemployment decreases," says Taylor.

And she adds that with complementary skills, both young and old workers will be needed in the workforce.

The problem is, most of the jobs being offered to highly skilled mature workers right now just aren't that attractive.



CARP's job fair aimed at seniors was called "Work Reimagined." (Don Pittis/CBC)

About 600 people attended CARP's elder job fair, billed as "work re-imagined," for example. But the jobs on offer were not the kinds of things the people I spoke to were hoping for. I saw David Hurdon slumped in a chair looking discouraged, having been offered minimum-wage and volunteer jobs. There was Mary Kay and Avon, and many less-well-known products to sell door to door or to friends. There were franchises that required an investment of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

There were agencies trying to help you find jobs. Hurdon put in his name at one called Third Quarter. "They may be the only useful connection I made," he emailed me later. "Nothing available on their site right now, but better to be registered than not."

Angelina Hamangoda is a lawyer who has worked around the world. Her last job before becoming unemployed was part-time at an after-school daycare, and she could find nothing at the CARP event.

"I feel very frustrated right now," she said. "I think all my education is down the drain."

The experiences of Hurdon and Hamangoda are right in line with a February report from the Canadian Chamber of Commerce on the national labour market.

It says people 55 and older are getting work and the participation rate has soared, nearly doubling since 1994. In fact, the unemployment rate of older workers who say they are looking is lower than the rate for all Canadians. But the jobs are not good, consisting of lower-wage part-time work.

It doesn't feel like a revolution.

But that does not shake Lisa Taylor's conviction. She says demographics and growing lifespans mean that to be successful it is essential for businesses to learn not to cast off older workers, but instead to learn how to make them useful.

Many businesses currently see their existing older workers as a cost rather than a benefit, and getting rid of them as a cost savings. And as the experience of everyone I spoke at this job fair showed, companies are generally reluctant to hire older workers and invest in their training. But Taylor says managers must adjust to the fact that a realistic working life expectancy needs to accommodate an 82 year lifespan, and that hiring and training older workers is not the short-term investment it might have been in the past.

She says successful businesses will inevitably figure this out.

"The people who get it, the employers that start to recognize that this workforce is talented and committed and flexible and ready to continue, they are the ones that are going to win the day in this revolution," says Taylor.

"The ones that right now are really resisting, they are going to be the ones that have to catch up as the talent revolution continues to roll."